

Washington teachers' local collective bargaining targeted by Senate Republicans

By Melissa Santos
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Cristal Java, a state worker union representative from Olympia, stands with her daughter, Solana, as she joined hundreds of teachers and their supporters for a rally on the Capitol steps to demand the legislature fund court-ordered smaller class sizes Saturday. “We support the teachers,” Java said. “My daughter is a future public school student.”

TONY OVERMAN — Staff photographer

The state Supreme Court has clearly told state lawmakers that it’s their responsibility — not local school districts’ — to provide adequate pay for public school employees.

But while state lawmakers agree that they need to boost what the state pays to hire teachers, they are of varying minds as to whether that means taking away teachers unions’ ability to bargain salaries with their local school districts.

The debate over whether the state should set teacher salaries and ban or restrict local bargaining is yet another hurdle to lawmakers agreeing on a plan to reduce the unconstitutional use of local school district levies.

The state Supreme Court has said that basic education costs — including teacher salaries and school supplies — are the state’s responsibility, and shouldn’t be paid through local levy dollars.

Right now, however, the state pays an average of about \$55,000 per teacher, while school districts use local levy dollars to add about \$11,000 to the average teacher's salary, according to legislative staff.

"The court has said several times that we've got to own up to the true cost of providing a teacher," said Sen. Bruce Dammeier, R-Puyallup. "And right now, we're not."

A proposal from Dammeier seeks to determine teacher salaries at the state level, and do away with local bargaining of pay entirely — except when it comes to negotiating extra pay for summer school duties or other extracurricular work.

Dammeier's plan, which is backed by leaders of the Republican Senate majority, would adjust teachers' pay according to where they live to take into account differences in local costs of living. Similar to the state's current salary model for teachers, it would include a range of salaries based on experience and other factors.

When presenting his plan to reporters this month, Dammeier said that local collective bargaining of basic school employee salaries "is currently illegal, has been illegal, but has been largely ignored."

"What we're talking about is reinforcing the existing law, and making sure we abide by the law," said Dammeier, one of the Republican Senate majority's leaders on education issues.

"The responsibility for the regular school day, and everything associated with really teaching a child their basic education, that's a state responsibility, and we're responsible for delivering the salary that's appropriate," he said.

Another plan from minority Senate Democrats would let teachers unions bargain salary enhancements, but limit local bargaining of salaries to 10 percent above what the state allocates.

Democrats who control the state House, meanwhile, don't see a need to limit bargaining at all, as long as the state meets its obligation to cover school districts' actual costs of hiring teachers.

House Majority Leader Pat Sullivan, D-Covington, said all the law requires is that the state pay school districts' basic education expenses, so the districts can stop using local levy money to supplement the state's teacher salary model.

Sullivan said the state can do that in part by setting up audits to ensure that local levy money is going only toward program enhancements, and not to paying teachers. Dammeier's proposal would also require districts to account for how they use local tax dollars, to ensure that local levy money is not being used for state responsibilities.

To set some parameters on bargaining, the state could set a minimum and maximum salary for teachers while still allowing local teachers unions and districts to negotiate contracts within that range, Sullivan said.

“Let them bargain locally,” Sullivan said. “Every school district is different.”

It’s possible that the Senate proposal could evolve to allow for statewide bargaining of teacher salaries, much like the state negotiates contracts with state employee unions, said Sen. Andy Hill, a Redmond Republican who is the Senate’s chief budget writer.

Even that, however, would draw the ire of the statewide teachers union, the Washington Education Association.

The WEA is opposing efforts to eliminate teachers unions’ ability to bargain salaries with their school districts, or to decide teachers’ contracts at the state level, spokesman Rich Wood said. It was one of several legislative proposals that drew thousands of teachers and their supporters to the state Capitol on Saturday to protest.

“It eliminates the ability to negotiate salaries to meet local needs,” Wood said, calling the Senate Republican plan “draconian” and “punitive.”

On Friday, lawmakers adjourned their 105-day session two days early without a deal on a new two-year operating budget or a plan for reforming the use of local school district levies. The Legislature will reconvene for a 30-day special session starting Wednesday.

Lawmakers are under a court order to come up with a plan to fully fund basic education by 2018. The state Supreme Court held the state in contempt last year because lawmakers failed to produce that court-ordered plan, and has promised unspecified sanctions if the Legislature doesn’t do more this year.

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